

JULY 21, 2008

Parashat Matot

Truth, Honesty and Godliness

Lo yachel devaro – “He shall not break his words” (Numbers 30:3)

Why does the Torah use the word *yachel* to describe breaking a vow? Sforno explains this phrase in the context of another verse in Leviticus (19:12) which teaches that one who swears falsely creates a *chillul Hashem* clearly establishing a connection between profanity, sanctity and oaths. One characteristic that distinguishes man from other creations is our power of speech. Describing the creation of man in the beginning of Genesis the Torah tells us that, “man became a living soul,” (Genesis 2:7) Targum Onkolos translates this phrase to mean “man became a talking spirit.” The power of speech represents the spark of God within us. When we use that power with cleanliness, productivity and honesty, we create a *kiddush Hashem* and sanctify God’s name. Conversely, when we use that very same divine spark to lie or spread rumors, we desecrate the godliness within represented by our ability to speak.

Thus we see that the power of speech, depending on how one uses it, has the ability to be both positive and negative. By honoring our oaths we take everyday speech and make the intent a binding agreement, or conversely, by reneging on our words we have the power to nullify good intentions. Unfortunately, the power of words to serve as a negative has been particularly evident recently in Gaza, where Hamas has not met its own obligations.

Since the beginning of last month’s Egyptian mediated effort to reduce hostilities and violence from and around Gaza, Hamas has allowed the firing of more than twenty Qassam rockets and mortars into Sderot and the surrounding region. In addition, weapons smuggling continues unabated along the Gaza-Egypt border. Despite these violations, Israel adhered to its commitment in the agreement and increased the amount of food, medicine and other goods entering Gaza, including the shipment of cement for the first time. It is important to remember that Israel has shown extreme restraint in the face of rocket and other terrorist attacks from Gaza, however, like every other sovereign nation Israel has the right and responsibility to defend its citizens if these attacks continue. Unlike the Hamas leadership in Gaza that sees a period of calm – a “*tahadiya*” as it’s known in Arabic - as a mere tactic to rearm and resupply in their war against Israel, the government of Israel understands the importance of keeping its commitments.

Despite ongoing provocations, Israel continues to uphold its word and keep to its side of the agreement. Hopefully, this *kiddush Hashem* will produce the tangible results of improvements in the lives of the Palestinian people, and bring them one step closer to a meaningful and lasting peace agreement with Israel. ■

Hatred of God, Hatred of Israel

Nikom nikmat B’nei Yisrael – “Avenge the Children of Israel...” (Numbers 31:2)

When the Torah describes the planning stages of the attack to exact retribution on the nation of Midian the verses do not clarify the source of the revenge. God tells Moses to avenge the harm that the Midianites had inflicted on the Children of Israel, yet oddly Moses does not command the people to take their revenge but rather to “inflict the Lord’s vengeance.” Why does Moses refer to this reprisal as God’s vengeance and not the people’s? The Midrash Tanchum quoted in Chizkuni (on verse 3) explains: “Said Moses to God: Master of the Universe! The vengeance is yours, for

the Canaanites only hate us because of You!” Moses realizes that the enemies of the Jewish people attack us because they despise the values and spirituality inherent in Jewish life. While we honor and venerate life, service of God and dedication to improving the world, the inhabitants of Canaan worshipped idolatry, reveled in paganism and its accompanying hedonism, and rejected the monotheistic morality the Jewish nation brought to the world.

Today this clash of values continues to underlie the conflict between Israel and those who wish to see her destroyed. While the Jewish State values life, freedom, democracy and peace, its adversaries idolize terror, death and destruction, as recently seen by the praise of terrorists with blood on their hands.

Following the swap of murdered Israeli soldiers Eldad Regev and Ehud Goldwasser, in exchange for five terrorist including Samir Kuntar who brutally killed an Israeli father and his three-year old daughter, the New York Times reported, “The [Lebanese] government declared a national day of celebration, closing all government offices and banks, and many private businesses closed as well. The president, the prime minister and others tried to present the swap as a triumph for Lebanon, not just Hezbollah.” Conversely, in Israel, Shlomo Goldwasser, Ehud’s father said, “They sacrificed over 700 of their best warriors and all their economy, and what they get for what they did is a murderer, a bloody murderer of a three-and-a-half-year-old girl and her father - and for this they are making all this glory, for this they sacrificed so much. So I feel only pity for them.” Israeli President Shimon Peres succinctly expressed, “Where does the moral call reside? With those who welcome a terrible murderer? With a nation lighting memorial candles for two of its bravest soldiers, who fell defending their home? The answer is clear. Justice stands on the side of Israel. Justice is the true form of human triumph.”

Ultimately the conflict between Israel and Hezbollah is a clash of values. The ideology that is built around hatred, a hatred focused not simply on Israel but the Jewish morals and ethics that guide it, must never prevail over the Jewish values of life, freedom and peace. ■

Culture and Summer Camp

Tarbut anashim chata'im – “A brood of sinful men” (Numbers 32:14)

Moses uses the phrase *tarbut anashim chata'im*, “a brood of sinful men” when lambasting the tribes of Reuven and Gad for valuing their own possessions over the morale of the Jewish nation. Many commentators dispute the meaning of the word *tarbut*. Ibn Ezra explains the word as referring to upbringing, connecting the root of the word to the word *harbeh*, meaning “many,” and to a person’s growth and development from “the multitude of years.” In essence, *tarbut* refers to values inculcated from one’s upbringing. In Modern Hebrew the word *tarbut* refers to a culture, emphasizing the values that motivate one’s thoughts and behavior. Connecting Ibn Ezra’s explanation to modern times, the *tarbut* that guides us are the values that we learn through the many years of our upbringing and share with the society around us. Both one’s upbringing and surroundings influence the cultural values that we live and promote.

Ibn Ezra’s concept of *tarbut*, of indoctrination, helps us understand the hatred so prevalent in the Gaza strip for Israel today, despite Israel’s efforts to alleviate the suffering of ordinary citizens of Gaza.

According to a Jerusalem Post report Hamas is initiating a massive number of summer camps throughout Gaza to indoctrinate the Palestinian youth. The article states that, “Hamas’s Central Committee for Summer Camps (CCSC) announced on July 1 the launching of approximately 800 summer camps in the Gaza Strip, where more than 150,000 children will spend their summer vacation.” The story further states that, “Last summer various reports from Gaza indicated that Hamas had been using such camps to train children in the use of weapons and to promote its Islamist ideology.” This Hamas *tarbut* – its education, civilization and culture – works to advance and develop the terrorist philosophy and to raise a new generation dedicated to fighting peace.

The Hamas leadership in Gaza is truly developing a *tarbut anashim chata'im* – a culture of sinful men. By indoctrinating children in the methods of terror Hamas is working to undermine peace both today and tomorrow. ■

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